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The Microwave Affair

President Ford's administration has removed some electronics intelligence equipment from the U.S. embassy roof in Moscow in return for reduced Soviet microwave bombardment of the embassy — a top secret effort to avoid an open rupture of U.S.-Soviet relations.

Intensified electromagnetic radiation beamed at the embassy to interrupt U.S. intelligence-gathering has produced repeated complaints that embassy personnel, including Ambassador Walter Stoessel, have been physically harmed. The Soviet government refused even to acknowledge the microwave attack, much less stop it. Thus, the Ford-Kissinger policy of detente was seriously threatened on a peripheral issue.

The result is what critical officials high in the Ford administration call "hand-wringing" diplomacy. Instead of outright U.S. demands that the Soviets observe the bounds of civilized behavior, a bargain of sorts has now been secretly struck. Some electronics equipment on the embassy's roof used to penetrate confidential Soviet communications has been removed. In return, electromagnetic radiation at the embassy has decreased. However, radiation remains above minimum safety standards, and the matter is by no means closed.

Many nuances and implications of this hush-hush affair are not fully known; nor is its ultimate outcome. But critics within the administration believe Mr. Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger are following tactics that have provably failed in past confrontations with the Kremlin.

The Soviets began directing microwaves at the U.S. embassy in the early 1960s, obviously as a countermeasure against electronic spying. By contrast, the United States has followed the normal diplomatic practice and dealt indirectly with similar electronic spying from the Soviet embassy in Washington — never by beaming microwaves against the Russians.

That the radiation in Moscow was above the Soviet's own safety standard has for years been the subject of innumberable conferences high in the government. President Johnson raised the matter at Glassboro, N.J., in 1967 with Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, who disclaimed any knowledge of microwave bombardment. However, the United States decided not to press it's grievances.

What changed this was a drastic increase in electromagnetic radiation at the embassy in Moscow within the last 24 to 36 months.

The main purpose of that increase is believed to be counter-measures against electronic eavesdropping devices in and on top of the embassy. But U.S. intelligence sources believe the Soviets might also be pursuing one or all of three other purposes.

First, actual physical harm to U.S. personnel (which some embassy employees claim has afflicted many embassy officials, including Ambassador Stoessel); second, psychological trauma, rendering employees unable to function effectively (which has clearly happened); third, to activate sensors secretly placed inside the embassy to record conversations for Soviet ears (which has not yet been confirmed).

No protest was made to Moscow after the radiation level increased, but word inevitably began leaking through Washington. Attempting to plug the leaks, high State Department officials argued privately that disclosure might generate damage suits against the government from embassy employees with claims of illness. Far more significantly, these officials continued, disclosure would compromise the embassy's electronics intelligence.

Indeed, after the Boston Globe's William Beecher revealed the increased microwave bombardment and Stoessel's illness, Soviet diplomats in Washington began a campaign of whispering to American newsmen about the Moscow embassy's electronic spying.

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Faced with growing leaks of secret information in the press, the administration moved publicly and privately. Publicly, an electioneering President Ford finessed the issue; his only public statement came in a Feb. 8 press conference at Durham, N.H.: "I have heard rumors concerning it, but I don't think it is a matter that ought to be discussed at this point." Privately, the United States turned to Dr. Kissinger's "quiet diplomacy," the full nature of which is unknown but clearly included removal of embassy electronic equipment and accompanying reduction of microwave bombardment.

Officials critical of "quiet diplomacy" believe State Department emissaries should have pounded the table instead of wringing their hands, should have loudly informed the Russians that violating the sovereignty of an embassy is an intolerable breech of international conduct.

Thus, the microwave affair transcends U.S. intelligence operations and even a hoped-for successful conclusion of diplomatic efforts. Faced with blatant provocation, the U.S. government did not react until after public disclosure, and then employed shrouded maneuvers to smother and smooth the trouble. The implications have not been lost on the Kremlin.